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ABSTRACT

The Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI) provides funds and technical assistance to targeted community colleges in an effort to improve educational access and foster economic development in distressed rural areas of the United States. This project brief describes RCCI's attempts to increase access by implementing an approach more holistic than the traditional open-door tactic. Nine RCCI pilot colleges participated in the national demonstration program, which attempted to remove access barriers from postsecondary education. For three years, the colleges were the subjects of field observations, site visits, interviews, focus group discussions, and other quantitative and qualitative data collection activities. Findings revealed that though several different factors influenced which strategies should be implemented, four general approaches appeared to be effective among the nine RCCI pilot colleges: partnerships for transition, alternative delivery systems, academic support services, and holistic approaches to access. However, several areas still need to be addressed: institutional culture, financial resources, welfare reform, gender issues, and racial dynamics. To improve access, emphasis must be placed on the importance of local cultural context, as well as faculty development and student personal growth programs. Contains 14 references and resources. (YKH)

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Rural Access

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PROJECT BRIEF

AACC-PB-98-1

Rural Community College Initiative

1. Access: Removing Barriers to Participation

Ronald Eller, Rubén Martinez, Cynthia Pace, Michael Pavel, Hector Garza, and Lynn Barnett

RURAL ACCESS

RCCI

Executive Summary

The Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI) is a decade-long commitment by the Ford Foundation to community colleges in distressed rural areas of the United States. Through RCCI, the foundation channels both funds and technical assistance to targeted community colleges to improve access and foster economic development. The RCCI approach includes redefining a college's concept of "access." It must mean more than the traditional open-door policy; especially in areas of high poverty, access also should include planned, targeted outreach to community members who are hesitant to approach the open door on their own, or those who have never considered it at all. Faced with out-migration and stagnant or declining economies, rural communities need everyone to contribute as fully as possible. By removing barriers to participation in higher education in spite of financial and other challenges—and by creating new awareness of opportunities—rural community colleges may become effective catalysts for community revitalization. By offering programs that enhance students' opportunities to succeed, colleges can help prevent the open door from becoming a revolving one.

RCCI Pilot Colleges—Sample Strategies

Alabama Southern Community College, Monroeville, Alabama
Re-engineered developmental studies program to emphasize individual learning styles, and assigned senior faculty to teach developmental courses.

Coahoma Community College, Clarksdale, Mississippi
Developed a mentoring program to help at-risk students succeed; helped low-income adults through tailored workforce training.

Fort Belknap College, Harlem, Montana
Met local learning needs by helping tribal members start and operate successful small businesses.

Fort Peck Community College, Poplar, Montana
Created a new family and community development center to address family problems affecting educational success.

Hazard Community College, Hazard, Kentucky
Built partnerships with primary and secondary schools to improve literacy.

Northern New Mexico Community College, Espanola, New Mexico
Built partnerships with corporations and agencies to build an artisan database and a regional distance learning network that links the college's large rural service areas.

Salish Kootenai College, Pablo, Montana
Served more than 300 people, including 50 new businesses; developed programs in business management and Indian business entrepreneurship.

Southeast Community College, Cumberland, Kentucky
Developed a joint college/community program for at-risk eighth graders that includes scholarships and mentoring.

Southwest Texas Junior College, Uvalde, Texas
Joined 21 school districts and Texas A&M University to create a regional distance education network.

The national demonstration program began in 1995 with nine RCCI pilot colleges that received Ford Foundation funding, along with technical assistance from MDC, Inc., a nonprofit organization specializing in workforce and economic development that manages the initiative. This report is the first of four reports on the impact of RCCI involvement, prepared by the project's documentation and assessment team. Conclusions are based upon three years of field observations, site visits, interviews, focus group discussions, and other quantitative and qualitative data collected from the nine pilot colleges. Subsequent project reports will cover economic development, team building, and institutional capacity.

Findings

There are many strategies for removing access barriers to postsecondary education. Differing institutional histories, regional geographies, and local cultures call for varied approaches to change. Local situations—including local assets (natural, institutional, cultural, business)—influence which strategies might be most effective. Four general approaches appeared to be effective among the nine RCCI pilot colleges:

- partnerships for transition (working with schools and businesses)
- alternative delivery systems (finding ways to reach remote areas)
- academic support services (helping disadvantaged students succeed)
- holistic approaches to access (reaching out to underserved groups)

Although progress has been made among the nine pilot colleges in identifying and implementing action strategies to broaden access, there are still gaps and challenges that cannot be ignored. The processes of rethinking access and redefining institutional missions are difficult ones. Several areas still to be addressed include the following:

- institutional culture (values, policies, practices, attitudes)
- financial resources (realignments, state/federal funding, new resources)
- welfare reform (focus on work, support service needs, varying regulations)
- gender issues (practices, attitudes, expectations, family issues)
- racial dynamics (historical relationships, ideologies, power structures, divisions of labor)

The most obvious conclusion to be drawn from the RCCI work on redefining access is that local cultural context cannot be overlooked. What works in one community may not work in another; different structures, relationships, and expectations affect the outcomes in each place. Strategies to improve access to postsecondary education must look toward the community and the context of that place. Strategies must take into account faculty and administrative staff development along with programs that encourage students' personal growth. Colleges must stretch beyond traditional roles and delivery systems to address "non-educational" issues that affect a student's ability to succeed in college. The most effective efforts among the pilot colleges are moving from institutionally based approaches to community-based ones. Resilient communities create resilient people with invigorated spirit.

This AACC Project Brief is based on a research report prepared by the authors, members of the Rural Community College Initiative Documentation and Assessment Team: Ronald Eller, director, Appalachia Center, University of Kentucky; Rubén Martinez, associate provost, University of Southern Colorado; Cynthia Pace, founder/senior partner, PACEMAKERS; Michael Pavel, assistant professor, Washington State University, Hector Garza, vice president, Access and Equity Programs, American Council on Education; and Lynn Barnett, director, Academic, Student, and Community Development, American Association of Community Colleges.

RCCI The Rural Community College Initiative

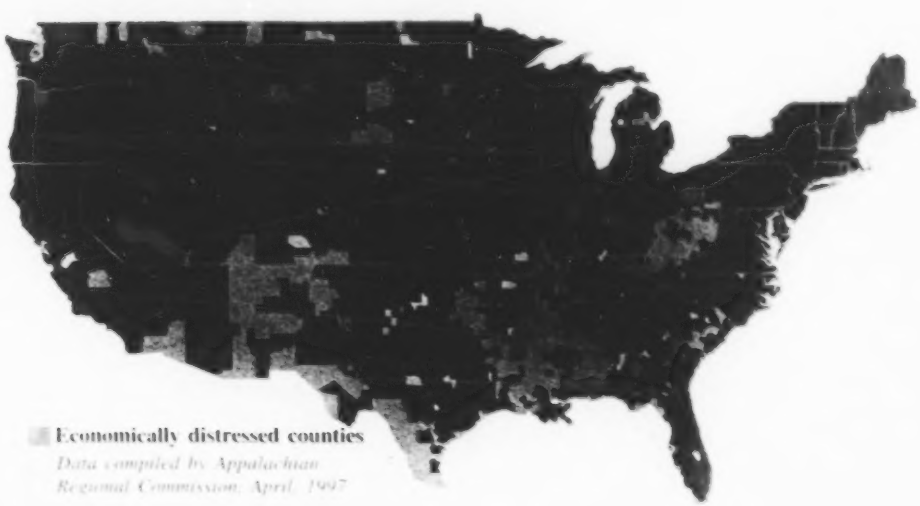
The next century calls for the greater utilization of technology, lifelong learning, educational flexibility, long term planning, and community-based strategies for growth. Community colleges are ideally situated to provide leadership to meet these challenges. To help develop that leadership in some of the most distressed rural areas in the United States, the Ford Foundation began the Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI) in 1993. The RCCI program is designed to help colleges in those areas develop locally effective practices that facilitate a transformation of the college and the community. Through RCCI, the Ford Foundation encourages colleges to establish sustainable programs that simultaneously (1) increase access to higher education for traditionally underserved and disadvantaged populations and (2) foster economic development in rural areas.

This report looks at some of the best of those local practices to increase access to higher education being employed by nine RCCI pilot institutions. It provides general implications from these projects collectively. Conclusions are based upon three years of field observations, site visits, interviews, focus group discussions, and other quantitative and qualitative data.

Pattern of Decline in Rural Areas

Throughout the 20th century, rural America has struggled to maintain a standard of living commensurate with that of the rest of the nation. Periods of economic growth in rural communities often have been followed by decline, job loss, and out-migration. Agricultural mechanization, natural resource depletion, and technological change have decreased the demand for rural labor, leaving many communities dependent and poor. In the shadows of modern "sunbelt cities" of the South and booming tourist destinations in the West and on Indian reservations across the country, there are pockets of rural poor who lack the education and job skills to succeed in the new economy of the 21st century.

Traditionally, higher education has served as a pathway out of poverty. For most of the 20th century, public and private scholarships provided opportunities for a few talented young people to attend college or vocational/technical school outside of their rural communities. Unfortunately, many of these individuals did not return home after graduation to contribute permanently to the local economy.



Economically distressed counties

Data compiled by Appalachian Regional Commission, April, 1997

Today there are more than 600 rural community colleges, one in four serving distressed areas from Appalachia to the Mississippi Delta, from the Texas–Mexico border to northern New Mexico and the Indian reservations of the West (MDC, 1996, Foreword). Open enrollment strategies on these campuses have dramatically improved educational access for many rural citizens, yet the problem of rural decline continues, especially in severely distressed areas that have suffered historically the most from the exploitation of human and natural resources.

The RCCI Challenge: Renewal for Rural America

The Rural Community College Initiative combines the goals of access and economic development to create innovative approaches to rural community development that aim to help rural people and their communities move toward prosperity in the next century. At the

RCCI Pilot Colleges
1995–2000

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RCCI
www.mdcinc.org/rcci.html

heart of this Initiative is the belief that rural community colleges are ideally situated to lead their regions along the road to economic renewal.

Through RCCI planning institutes and implementation grants, the Ford Foundation invited nine community colleges to "think broadly about their potential as catalysts for regional development" and to create on their campuses a "climate for innovation that will spark local solutions" (MDC 1996, 1). With technical assistance from MDC, Inc., a nonprofit organization specializing in workforce and economic development that manages RCCI, these pilot colleges created college/community teams that participated in a "Vision to Action" planning process and implemented a variety of community partnerships and local projects. All were designed to improve access to higher education and job opportunities, and to spur business development. Systematic self-assessment of the college and its community was key to the RCCI strategy.

Within a context of a national community college movement toward community-based education, the RCCI challenged each of these institutions to improve education and economic opportunities by linking access with economic development in ways that would redefine practices of the college and re-vitalize the local community.

Redefining Access

The issue of access to postsecondary education has been an ongoing interest among education practitioners, policymakers, and researchers. A prevailing theme is that access is a principal characteristic of the American higher education system and a primary mission of community colleges, yet higher education remains elusive for various groups. More equitable opportunities may be achieved by increasing the resources and enhancing the reputations of community colleges and institutions serving historically disadvantaged populations. At the same time, colleges must attend to the sociocultural and economic factors that influence the educational aspirations of people, especially those in communities currently offering little hope for economic prosperity for many of their residents.

The RCCI challenges rural colleges not only to build communities through collaboration and local partnerships but also to bring those traditionally left out of the system into that community.

Volumes of data have been cited to illustrate the effect of postsecondary education on an individual's prospects in life. A variety of factors determine who has access to that education, including pre-college experiences, interactions with college representatives, perceptions of campus environments and postsecondary education, and perceptions by college representatives regarding their community and their position within the institution.

The community college mission is based on the philosophy of open access to higher education, but colleges serving distressed areas face special challenges—geographic distances, poorly prepared students, weak economies, and inadequately trained workforces. To reach those who face these special barriers to education and employment, colleges may need to redefine the meaning of access, moving beyond traditional open-door strategies to provide aggressive outreach and support services to the disadvantaged. There is need for "active attention to several populations that are at risk" (MDC 1996, 6).

The RCCI challenges rural colleges not only to build communities through collaboration and local partnerships but also to bring those traditionally left out of the system into that community. For many citizens of economically distressed rural areas, postsecondary education has been "an alien idea" and college a "forbidding institution" (MDC 1996, 6). For colleges to serve these at-risk and alienated populations, they must re-examine old assumptions, re-structure delivery systems, comprehend family and community problems, and aggressively reach out in new and creative ways.

Effective Local Practices: Four Strategies

The diversity of rural communities belies any single solution to the challenge of access. Differing institutional histories, regional geographies, and local cultures call for varied approaches to change. The most effective strategies for improving access in rural areas appear to be those that spring from the local context and grow as a result of local assets. RCCI pilot colleges have designed a variety of strategies to improve access to education and employment. These strategies generally fall into four categories:

- **Partnerships for transition** – partnerships with secondary schools and businesses that can help individuals make a successful transition to higher education and better employment.
- **Alternative delivery systems** – alternatives, such as distance learning, to traditional ways of providing access to remote areas.
- **Academic support services** – programs and services that help disadvantaged students succeed in college.
- **Holistic approaches to access** – broad outreach to recruit and support underserved populations such as high school dropouts, welfare parents, and other disadvantaged adults.

Partnerships for Transition

Common to most distressed rural areas is the fragmentation of private and public agencies, which makes it difficult to create partnerships that effectively address school dropout or low achievement, welfare reform, job creation, adult education, and other problems. Yet limited local resources demand collaboration if aggressive strategies to improve education levels and workforce skills are to succeed. Building effective college/community partnerships has been a key component of RCCI, and the nine pilot colleges have launched a number of locally effective projects designed to improve the transition from high school to college, enhance workplace performance, and increase opportunities for community revitalization.

Collaboration with schools and universities

In Appalachian Kentucky as many as 50 percent of ninth-grade students do not complete high school and fewer than 50 percent of those who graduate go on to higher education. The RCCI team at Southeast Community College responded by launching a new partnership with three local school systems to establish a joint college/community early intervention program for eighth graders. The Southeast Scholars Program selects 16 students per year, matches them with faculty and community mentors, and provides them with scholarships to attend Southeast upon graduation.

Hazard Community College also has reached out to the schools, assuming the responsibility for the area school-to-work program, assisting in the development of entrepreneurship training programs in local high schools and bringing parents and local educators together on the campus for workshops. Some suggest that the college's presence in the schools has begun changing attitudes toward higher education.

Southwest Texas Junior College (SWTJC) created partnerships with 21 local school districts distributed across 11 rural counties that will provide Internet access and videoconferencing capabilities. This system, known as the "TeleVilla," will provide access to academic offerings previously unavailable at the region's high schools, especially those experiencing financial hardships. SWTJC now offers concurrent enrollment opportunities to local high school students and has entered into purchasing agreements with the Middle Rio Grande Development Council and local school districts to maximize institutional buying power.

Alabama Southern Community College has designed its Title IV TRIO Program to work with principals, counselors, and parents to encourage qualified students to pursue opportunities for continuing education. This practice has increased the number of students enrolling in postsecondary education.

Collaboration with business

Several RCCI colleges—most notably Hazard, Southwest Texas, and Coahoma Community College—have initiated promising collaborations with local industries to minimize the effects of downsizing and to provide management training and other on-site educational services to local workers. Southwest Texas Junior College created a self-supporting Business and Industry Office that pursues contracts with local businesses to upgrade the skills of the regional workforce.

Coahoma Community College expanded its Skill Tech Center to coordinate campus and community efforts to improve basic skills and technology training. The Center's mission is to train individuals for specific skills needed in industry and to provide customized adult education classes. Such centers link the college with business and industry in the area and serve as gateways to enrollment in training programs at the college.

These partnerships go beyond emergency and short-term training programs to establish more permanent relationships among colleges, public schools, and business and industry. They hold promise for changing community members' commitment to education, improving educational attainment, and enhancing personal income and the overall quality of the regional workforce.

Alternative Delivery Systems

Colleges serving rural populations have long recognized the need to extend course offerings off campus in order to improve access for remote communities. Geographic distances and transportation problems make it difficult for many rural individuals with family and work responsibilities to pursue higher education. Branch campuses and extended campus centers offer opportunities for basic education and core coursework, but the range of offerings is often limited. Recent advancements in technology, however, make it possible to improve the delivery of a broader curriculum at the main campus as well as to these remote sites through telecommunications systems, and a number of RCCI colleges have responded by expanding their distance education technologies.

Southwest Texas Community College has substantially expanded its distance education and now offers more than 20 courses per academic year. Videoconferencing also takes place between the main campus and its outreach centers at Del Rio and Eagle Pass. In addition, the college has signed an agreement with both Texas A&M University and Sul Ross University to allow the delivery of graduate courses that will provide local citizens and campus staff access to graduate degrees.

Distance learning facilities are under construction at other RCCI campuses (e.g., Northern New Mexico Community College, Alabama Southern Community College, Fort Belknap College, Fort Peck Community College, and Salish Kootenai College), and over the next decade the electronic delivery of courses should grow significantly for people in outlying areas.

Academic Support Services

Increasing participation in credit and non-credit courses is only part of the challenge of improving access to education and job training opportunities in rural areas. Disadvantaged and first-generation college students often need academic and personal support services to succeed in higher education. The retention of poorly prepared students in certificate and degree programs has long been a challenge, and developmental and remedial programs are expensive. Yet successful transition to employment or to advanced degrees is dependent upon remediating academic deficiencies, counseling for careers, and building students' self-confidence. This is especially true for low-income students, particularly those from ethnic minority cultures, who often see college as an alien and estranging environment.

Stimulated by RCCI, Alabama Southern Community College restructured its developmental studies program to provide a stronger support system for its students. In so doing, it has changed the face of instruction at the college as well. A variety of changes have enhanced the college's ability to diagnose student deficiencies and provide both personal and instructional support:

- extensive use of new computer labs and telecommunication capacities
- the restructuring of student success testing instruments and transferring them to faculty for counseling and advising
- expansion of tutorial programming
- integration of General Education Degree and adult education programs into the curriculum.

By integrating basic skills, student support services, and adult education the college has focused more squarely on students and learning, greatly reducing student attrition and enhancing student attitudes toward learning. This new approach to developmental studies has energized the faculty, raised the bar on faculty performance expectations, and generally transformed the teaching and learning process on the campus as a whole.

Holistic Approaches to Access

Many rural residents must overcome a variety of non-educational barriers before they can take advantage of postsecondary education opportunities. Family income, childcare services, health problems, transportation, customs, and attitudes toward education can prevent men and women from achieving productive employment or pursuing further education. If rural community colleges are to serve as gateways to prosperity and knowledge for these hard-to-serve populations, they must broaden the traditional meaning of access to education to include holistic approaches to learning that reach the individual throughout life and within the context of family and community. Some of the pilot colleges are demonstrating that connecting family and business services to an "access agenda" pays off.

Because of unique world views or institutional and community contexts, some exciting strategies to reach out to underserved populations among RCCI pilot colleges have evolved at

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tribal and Hispanic colleges. At tribal colleges, not surprisingly, philosophical approaches to community have resulted in programming designed to reach the people who most need help. Sometimes the need is very basic—initiating a conversation with someone who needs adult basic education. Tribal educators feel that even a simple conversation is as significant to access as clarification of a degree program. On the reservations, access is about fulfilling the needs of and being of service simultaneously to individuals, families, and the community.

1. Business development

Developing a business services "door" is one access strategy. Salish Kootenai College launched a Tribal Business Information Center that in two years has touched the lives of 378 people, resulting in more than 44 business startups and 38 business expansions. The college helped at least 15 families get off welfare; dozens more individuals have enrolled in a newly formed business program, signed up for entrepreneurship classes, and participated in a variety of workshop/educational endeavors. Fort Belknap College's Small Business Assistance Center offers similar programs that have attracted more than 100 people, many of whom must travel 30 to 50 miles to participate. While keeping the door open for dozens of tribal members to use the computer facility, the Fort Belknap Center staff started a computer training class for elders.

2. Family assistance

The Fort Peck Community College Center for Family and Community Development provides a far-reaching example of community-based education. Led by a 15-member team, primarily women who are intimately familiar with various communities throughout the Fort Peck Reservation, the Center offers a variety of programs for welfare recipients, teen parents, young families, displaced adult workers, potential farmers and ranchers, recovering substance abusers, and others. Workshops on domestic abuse, dysfunctional family issues, grief recovery, staying sober, communicating with teachers, and other subjects routinely attract as many as 100 people in spite of transportation hardships. Such programs not only help address a variety of family and community barriers to employment and education, but also create an image of the college as a caring place and a gateway to other educational opportunities.

At Fort Peck, family and community are so central to the mission of the college that the administration created the Department of Community Services to coordinate outreach programs. In addition to the family and community center, the department houses programs for distance education, continuing education, summer school, culture and language, and adult education. Other community-based programs—Even Start Literacy Program, High Plains Rural Systemic Initiative, Land Grant Status Initiatives, Fort Peck Community Business Assistance Center, and the Community Health and Wellness Center—are also incorporated into the new department.

3. Personal contact

Attitudes of faculty, staff, and administrators alike at the tribal colleges reflect a strong commitment to a broad definition of access. Direct personal contact with tribal members is crucial, they say, but it must be continual and should lead to program development that meets both individual and family needs. Fort Peck, for example, believes it should remove any

barriers that inhibit individual and family access to the college's programs and services. Removing barriers may mean addressing issues like affordability, knowing a student's family situation, and helping people step-by-step through the application and enrollment phase with kindness, according to college philosophy.

From their inception the tribal colleges' mission has been to define service to the community broadly, to meet both community and individual needs, and to do it with a collective spirit. It is not the sole responsibility of a few people. The RCCI philosophy has been a catalyst to help these colleges more effectively extend this mission within their communities.

4. Childcare issues

Like others, Hispanic culture traditionally places a high priority on family values. This is evident at two Hispanic-serving colleges, where daycare centers serve the needs of students with young children. Southwest Texas Junior College has established an early childhood development center, and Northern New Mexico Community College has created a childcare center. Both centers provide valuable services to students with small children. Although the need to provide such services to students is widely recognized among community college leaders in this country, it is the elevation of these services to the top of institutional priorities that is significant here. These facilities not only make it easier for parent-students to attend classes, but they also provide the children with significant early socialization experiences that will likely influence the children's future educational aspirations.

Gaps and Challenges

Constructing a building and putting up a welcome sign is no longer enough to ensure access, noted one professor at an RCCI focus group discussion. Pilot colleges know that in order to expand educational opportunities they must redefine their role in the community and re-examine the "open door" strategy. Re-inventing—or rediscovering—institutional missions and rebuilding distressed communities, however, is a long-term process, and these institutions have only begun the journey. Many gaps and barriers remain to be overcome.

Institutional Culture

At the heart of institutional change are the attitudes and behaviors of faculty and staff who must implement and sustain new philosophies, pedagogies, and programs. Long entrenched academic cultures and individual comfort zones must be transformed through open discussion and college-wide planning. Presidential leadership and effective team management can initiate this institutional dialogue, but the involvement of the entire academic community is necessary to sustain institutional change. Many RCCI pilot colleges (e.g., Hazard, Coahoma, Northern New Mexico, and Southeast) are currently engaged in institution-wide strategic planning that promises to extend the RCCI vision of access across the campus. Several campuses have launched community leadership programs to build regional civic capacity based upon the RCCI philosophy of collaboration and community-based partnerships.

Re-inventing—or rediscovering—institutional missions and rebuilding distressed communities, however, is a long-term process, and these institutions have only begun the journey.

Engaging faculty—and, for that matter, community leaders—in a strategic planning dialogue, however, may not necessarily result in new ways of thinking and doing. Getting individuals to "think outside of the box" of traditional definitions of education and economic development is difficult, and it is easier to tweak the paradigm within the framework of traditional programs and delivery systems than to significantly reshape it. College faculty are much more comfortable with college-based programs involving curriculum reform than with community-based initiatives that require new relationships and new ways of thinking about education and community service. Simple realignment of institutional practices involving adult education, basic skills education, student support services, or training for local business does not challenge simplistic "open door" definitions of access. Innovative approaches to teaching and learning are essential to educational change, but they are only part of the process. If colleges are to serve people traditionally left out of higher education and regional development, faculty and community leaders must think broadly—beyond the classroom, beyond campus walls, and beyond individuals.

Financial Resources

Campus leaders are quick to point out that expanding access to the underserved members of their regions will require more than just a re-conceptualization of access. The lack of financial resources, both for students and the institution, continues to present a formidable barrier to education and economic development in these distressed areas. They are pressured to increase tuition rates, limited local job opportunities, and state/federal funding systems driven by student full-time equivalency credits. All these present real financial barriers to the development of non-credit programs, daycare facilities, transportation networks, individual and family counseling services, and other programs necessary to develop a region's human

Getting individuals to "think outside of the box" of traditional definitions of education and economic development is difficult.

capital. Although these issues confront community colleges across the nation, they appear to have a more profound impact on colleges in distressed rural areas.

Many community colleges in distressed rural areas already are severely strapped by inadequate financial resources and personnel. Grants alone do not solve financial problems. If new programs to expand access are to be sustained over time, they must be integrated into the life of the institution and into its general operating budget. Resources must be realigned or new resources identified to support space, personnel, technology, training, and other needs resulting from expanded access programs. Distance education alone requires resources for curriculum planning and development, faculty training, technical support resources, and technology management if rural populations are to be served effectively over time. State and federal policymakers, local foundations and businesses, and higher education administrators all will have to learn to think creatively with regard to financing such initiatives if access is to be expanded and disadvantaged populations served.

Welfare Reform

Welfare reform implementation is an example of the continuing gap between policy and educational programming. The goal of welfare reform—moving people from welfare to work—is consistent with the mission of community colleges. Many current students receive public assistance while they are pursuing adult education, job training, or a degree program. Yet the policies surrounding the implementation of welfare reform not only create additional barriers for those currently receiving public assistance and who might seek access to programs at the community colleges, but also present a threat to recipients currently enrolled in college.

Since the focus of welfare reform is on work rather than education, funds available for vocational education are limited to one year (states may extend this limit if they choose), at the end of which recipients must be working 20 hours per week through FY 1998, increasing by five hours in FY 1999 and another five hours in FY 2000. Funds, moreover, are generally not available for non-credit and remedial education. In some states students must enroll for a certain number of hours per semester. Many welfare recipients have difficulty securing child care and transportation, need basic educational support and personal counseling, and often have personal or family health problems that make it difficult for them to successfully complete their course work. This shift in funding from multiple years to one year of postsecondary support threatens students currently enrolled in two-year degree programs and discourages new welfare dependent students from matriculating in such programs.

Even within states, local administration of welfare reform may vary from county to county and many social service caseworkers, pressed to move people rapidly from welfare to work, tend to emphasize short-term job training programs rather than general education and degree programs through the community colleges. Federal welfare reform legislation provides no additional resources for job creation, and most state funding policies do not recognize courses offered through continuing education. Stories abound about part-time students dropping out of college, fearing that they could not complete their programs, work, and maintain their families under the new welfare regulations. Other low-income students have dropped out as a result of recent changes in federal academic progress regulations that eliminated financial support for underachieving students. The short-term job placement goals of welfare reform create not only a challenge for distressed rural areas where there are very few low-skill manufacturing jobs, but also a challenge for community colleges to find ways to serve low-income community members.

Gender

The barriers to access within welfare reform illustrate another challenge facing rural community colleges. The majority of adults receiving public assistance are single, female parents who face difficult problems with childcare and transportation. Females constitute a majority of students enrolled in community colleges nationally (57 percent) and in the RCCI pilot colleges (65 percent). Historically, among poor populations of Appalachians, African-Americans, Chicanos, American Indians, and other ethnic minorities, males have been slower to take advantage of opportunities in higher education for employment and personal growth than females. (National Center for Education Statistics, 189–90; Phillippe, 26).

For rural adult males, displaced from employment in the mines, fields, and forests, attending college presents not only financial and academic challenges but also a cultural one.

For rural adult males, displaced from employment in the mines, fields, and forests, attending college presents not only financial and academic challenges but also a cultural one. For most low-income males, accustomed to short-term gratification and physical labor, "college" is an alien idea. This is especially true among the rural poor. Low-income men in rural communities see few incentives for the pursuit of higher education, and in some cases males are threatened when females pursue their own education. Reaching more young men and older males—which has effects on family solidarity and social stability as well as economic prosperity—presents a major challenge to all postsecondary institutions, but especially to rural colleges. As the RCCI tribal colleges show especially well, offering special interest, short-term courses, workshops, and cultural events as well as providing personal and family counseling can help an institution reach displaced males. Creating an environment on campus that is more culturally sensitive for both males and females not only can improve individual confidence and community pride, but also can create an atmosphere for community reflection and self-evaluation. Only the community itself can address its own cultural barriers that prevent it from becoming an inclusive learning community.

Racial Dynamics

The nine RCCI colleges represent the diversity—and the divisive history—of many rural communities. In the South, Southwest, and tribal regions, historical relationships among different ethnic groups continue to shape inter-group relations. These relationships sometimes constrain the development of partnerships between groups and limit possibilities for enhancing institutional capacities to address access barriers. Racially stratified power structures limit the capacity of community colleges to increase resources and build linkages to both dominant and subordinate groups. Sometimes the relationships become complicated. For instance, people at a historically black college, which has traditionally served the African-American community and sees that as its niche, may believe that the institution's viability or credibility would be enhanced by serving its white community. This can result in a perception that the college's traditional clientele may not be as well served as in the past. These attitudes influence the efforts to secure funding from the state and surrounding communities.

Cultural differences among groups also add to the difficulty of providing relevant educational opportunities. At Northern New Mexico, for example, the educational interests and learning styles of Pueblos, Hispanics, and Anglo-Americans are not necessarily the same. Issues of regional development shape conceptions of the curriculum that differ across the groups and challenge campuses to meet specific group interests.

At the tribal colleges, there are racial tensions between tribal members and non-Indians that stymie opportunities to develop meaningful partnerships. The Indian wars of the last century

now take place in non-Indian banks where Indians have difficulty getting loans, in public schools where few—if any—of the administrators or teachers are Indian, and in the local economy where Indian businesses need non-Indian clientele to survive. RCCI philosophical and logistical support for celebrating cultural heritage at all the colleges may help provide insight into how the colleges can employ cultural distinctiveness as a support for access to services in higher education.

Conclusion

Improving economic opportunities for minority populations in rural distressed areas requires colleges and communities to re-examine traditional assumptions about access to higher education. Strategies that are appropriate for urban and suburban areas are inadequate for rural communities. The challenges of geography, culture, poverty, and history of rural places suggest that accepted open admissions strategies and enrollment-driven programming are frequently insufficient to meet the needs of these communities in the 21st century.

Change begins with honest self-assessment.

Just as we are learning that an effective curriculum for rural students includes a "pedagogy of place" and that appropriate economic development for rural areas is place specific, strategies to improve access to higher education must look toward the context of that community. Change begins with honest self-assessment.

Re-defining the meaning of access within the academic culture of the campus and within the community as a whole is the critical first step to building more effective access strategies. This means not only the re-education of faculty and administrative staff but also the implementation of a variety of innovative programs and practices that reach students where they live and encourage both personal and family growth. Such practices include the expansion of traditional educational services through new technologies, distance learning, worksite training, developmental coursework, and scholarship aid as well as providing a more comfortable and place-sensitive learning environment that values local culture.

In order to reach those populations within rural communities that historically have faced barriers to employment and education, however, colleges must move beyond traditional roles and delivery systems to address non-educational issues such as child care, transportation, and family and personal development. Just as educational reform in rural secondary schools is placing greater emphasis upon parent involvement, student nutrition, after-school programs, transportation services, and interactive learning, rural colleges must develop family-based approaches to learning, including the initiation of partnerships with schools and other social agencies committed to this goal. Just as many new businesses are finding ways to support the educational and personal growth of employees in order to increase productivity, colleges must learn how to support the entire individual within his or her family and community context in order to improve academic success.

Participation in the Rural Community College Initiative has empowered pilot campuses to re-examine the meaning of access and to begin a dialogue internally and with their communities to find ways to overcome a variety of existing barriers. Despite these barriers, this "re-invention" of the institution holds an exciting and promising future for rural America. Some campuses have focused their energies on internal changes within the teaching and learning environment; others have developed holistic approaches and aggressively reached out to underserved client populations. Both are necessary to implement access strategies that are more consistent with local culture and values.

Colleges must move beyond traditional roles and delivery systems to address non-educational issues such as child care, transportation, and family and personal development.

The RCCI process demonstrates that institutional capacity for increasing access to previously underserved populations can be expanded through the injection of new ideas and higher expectations for institutional achievement. All nine pilot campuses are much more visible in their communities after two years' involvement in the RCCI than they were before it. Interaction with their communities has increased collaborations and partnerships for change. Invigorated campus leadership has recognized that there is a need for leadership development in the local community as well, and many of the campuses have launched their own community leadership programs.

To varying degrees, the nine RCCI pilot colleges have adopted community-based frameworks for improvement, as opposed to institutionally based approaches. A community-based approach to access creates a different paradigm for learning that measures success not just in terms of numbers enrolled or credits awarded but in terms of self-confidence, family stability, desire for learning, creativity, and mental and physical health. This approach values personal efficacy, that "I can do it" attitude that invigorates the human spirit. The study of rural community change indicates that in times of economic crisis resilient communities are those that generate new civic leadership and institutional assertiveness to identify creative solutions to local challenges. Resilient communities create resilient people. They empower individuals with the means to discover their talents and to go beyond survival and to thrive. Rural colleges can serve as important leaders to that empowerment, and RCCI is an important catalyst for that change.

Guidelines for Change

Acknowledge local cultural context above all.

Address childcare, transportation, and family issues.

Increase partnerships with community-based organizations.

Sustain institutional partnerships through personal relationships.

Expand access beyond open admissions.

Consider local historical relationships.

Overcome institutional exclusions.

Develop inclusive curricula and services.

Expand the community stakeholders in and out of the college.

Remember that change takes time and persistence.

RCCI

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